

column for dialogue

Film/Video Art

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Southwestern Ballet, a 30 minute experimental film by Dan Curry and Kim Laughlin, uses clever optical printing techniques to present a witty reflection on representations of the western U.S. landscape. Two women tourists move from one scenic view to another. Steeped in the conventional wisdom of modern photography aesthetics, the photographer wants to recapture the sites of William Henry Jackson's 19th century pictures of the American Eden, as if the physical place were entwined with its image. However the postmod partner holds no such delusions and enjoys collecting the kitsch experience of postcards and stereoscopic slide viewers, travelling through a map which makes the actual territory purely incidental.

Disabusing the photographer and audience of any undeconstructed realist sentiments, the film shows famous sites in 19th century photos, such as Balanced Rock in the Garden of the Gods, Colorado, as well as today's National Park Service full of vans, campers, and motorcycles. But it doesn't rest easy in consuming today's commercialized landscape. Camera and optical editing tricks alert us to the master-presence of manipulating filmmakers. Romantic notions of art as genius self-expression reappear through the postmod pastiche. At times the filmmakers' jokes--narrative or formal, verbal or visual--go on too long. These authorial bits sometimes overpower the rythmn. Perhaps the film's pace is better appreciated if it's thought of as a sampler of special optical effects rather than an art-critical essay.

Thus described, Southwestern Ballet fits well within familiar parameters of the contemporary film avant garde and provides a ready benchmark of the current scene. While there appears to be a gradual decrease in the amount of experimental film making, for various reasons, there's been a definite increase in critical writing about the U.S. situation. Some observers such as J. Hoberman of the Village Voice and Fred Camper claim that the New American Cinema movement of the 60s is dead. A few masters (the male prejudice is significant) still produce works of genius. But the visionary romanticism of the wild seer is gone, and the field is now filled with academically trained and employed hacks who are churning out derivative and inferior work supported by tax dollars. The retort, largely voiced by regional filmmakers, claims that excellent work still appears, but does not gain recognition by the New York biased--if not based--experimental film

establishment with its Manhattan parochialism and faddish tastes.

In the 70s, a university curriculum shift from traditional humanities courses to various communications and media programs saw the establishment of teaching positions for filmmakers, including experimentalists, which created a stable and geographically dispersed base for their continued production by supplying equipment, facilities, and personal income. Now that foundation is eroding due to the arrival of video and attendant changes in media art and commerce. Co-director Kimberly Laughlin's career has been from the start a mixture of self expressive and directed sculpture and photo work in art school and trade and professional jobs from window dressing to food stylist and photographer. The point being that today more than ever before, the art media world primarily serves a subordinate economic function within the U.S. system. There are contradictions, of course, and the institutionalization of the avant garde is uneven and open to sudden change.

Dan Curry provides a good example of how this historical change affects makers. In the mid-70s he studied filmmaking as an undergraduate at Northwestern's Radio/TV/Film department and stayed on to be in the first group of NU film MFAs. That's where we met and collaborated on a few projects. His work was characterized by patience and planning in exploring the fundamentals of cinematic expression--he emphasized editing, rephotographing and changing the image. He then continued to make films, some sponsored, others financed through grants and his teaching income from Virginia Tech (Blacksburg), Ohio University, U of Miami (Coral Gables), and Grand Valley State in western Michigan. After collecting the appropriate festival awards, grants, one person shows, and distribution arrangements, he was a "promising, early-midcareer artist" to the art world and a "ready for tenure film/video maker" to the academy. Even those who are relatively successful within the evolved system of academic experimental filmmaking can find it limited and limiting. Burned out and angry, he left Grand Valley to work in the Chicago media industry where his developed technical skills let him earn a living in video post production houses.

How should we regard this? From the point of view of the film art world, there's more to achieve: New York shows, a European tv grant, critical acclaim in the art film press, a big (\$25,000) AFI grant. But from the point of view of a capitalist media industry in an era of deregulation and supply side aesthetics, Curry is in a fine place because the video industry needs highly skilled and talented people. His expertise in optical printing served him well

in learning the new technology of film/video editing. Like the animators who find new employment thanks to MTV's devouring of images, Curry found that his basic skills and knowledge about sound/image manipulation serve him well in finding commercial work in a time of rapidly changing technologies and diffusion systems. And from the point of view of the larger political and economic system, the art world of experimental film, the colleges and universities and the "keep on begging" grant system work fine as a training ground and minor league. Despite its academic art world trajectory, Curry's career ends up resolutely in business, with his filmmaking in the remaining time.

At the same time, ideologies of self expression and professional autonomy which are an important part of the art ethos of our time must compete with the realities of how and why people are employed within the system. Artists and other professionals don't like to think about this very much. They may grant the reality of the gallery art market in painting and sculpture, but they don't want to look at the consciousness industry as a whole, in its range from Dan Rather and the New York Times to experimental film, from Hollywood and cable tv to avant garde video. But we can forget or ignore how the whole system works only at the risk of fooling ourselves about the material basis of media art today, and the social relations it produces and shares.